Ernest Rice McKinney - 6 April 1961 - by Ed Edwin.

Q: I wonder if you would identify yourself by your full name, then give a thumbnail recounting of your early life, and if you happen to think of any instances before you got into this organizational work that had a bearing on the course that you took in your life, either towards organizing or for some other reason, you might recount that in a little more detail. I think it might be interesting.

Mr. McKinney. My name is Ernest Rice McKinney. I was born in Malden, West Virginia, December 7, 1886, in the home of my maternal grandfather. One of the significant things about having been born in this home was that it was here I had my first experience with labor struggles, with which I was later identified. I remember when, very young, my grandfather, who was a coal miner as well as a Baptist minister, was brought home on a stretcher after having been wounded in a struggle to organize the coal diggers in that region.

After this, the next experience I think that has any significance for what is to come later was years later, when I was a student at Oberlin College, I straggled into a cellar bookstore in Cleveland, Ohio, and talked to a man ~~in~~ there who ~~[illegible]~~ turned out to be a member of the Socialist Party. I remember that I bought,

on the occasion of this visit, a book with the title, The Right to Be Lazy. I did not understand at the time that I bought this book that it was something more than the title indicated.

This is all that I think had any significance for the events that took place, that I participated in later in life.

Q: Could you be a little more specific about when your grandfather was brought in on a stretcher? How old were you then?

McKinney: I was probably eight years old, and had gone back to my grandfather's home for the summer. We always went there during the summer. But I had lived in the midst of these coal miners, and my earliest recollection of workers is these ~~dirty, soot-covered~~ covered with coal dust coal miners coming from work, ~~with their torchlights~~, their lamps on the front of their caps.

Q: Were there several locations where you had this contact with the coal miners?

McKinney: Not until later in life, when I became active and engaged in work with coal miners. But in the earlier day I had no contact, because we went from Huntington, West Virginia, where my father was principal of the Negro school, which combined

the grammar school with a three year high school. We went from there to Washington, D.C., where my father was employed in the Treasury Department. There I went to high school. These early memories apperently had faded out, because they did not arise again until several decades later.

Q: About the book that you mentioned, The Right to Be Lazy, about how old were you when you read that book?

McKinney: ~~Then~~ I was past 20, when I read that book.

Q: What happened after this reading?

McKinney: After this I began to read in the papers of the speeches and appearances of Eugene V. Debbs, and I remember now that the first time I voted for any candidate was for Eugene Debbs for President.

Q: Do you remember which election that was?

McKinney: That is very difficult to remember, but it was something like 50 years ago.

Q: Let's jump to your organizing activities. When did you first

become attively involved in any kind of labor organizing?

McKinney: I first became active in labor organizing after I had become a member of an organization known as the Conference for Progressive Labor Action, known popularly as the CPLA. This organization had been formed by, and was headed by A.J. Muste.

Q: To go back a little bit, Mr. McKinney, what were some of the other activities important in your life before you got into this labor organizing?

McKinney: After the First World War, when I came back to Pittsburgh, where I had lived before I went into the Army, I was Western Pennsylvania secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. This was really the beginning of a type of organized activity in which I participated before becoming active in the labor movement. That was in the struggle for Negro equality and Negro rights, and this is important because it is related to some of the activities which I carried on in the labor movement.

Also ~~I should like to mention,~~ about this time, as editor of a Negro paper in Pittsburgh, the Pittsburgh American, and later as a columnist for the Pittsburgh Courier, I was the first person in the country to write propaganda against the Garvian movement.

c: On your NAACP organizing for Negro rights, can you be a little more specific? Rights in which fields?

McKinney: As executive secretary of the NAACP, in Pittsburgh, and as a newspaper writer and in other organizations, I carried out certain fundamental beliefs ~~which~~ I had which many people accept now, but which very few people (even including Negroes) accepted then: that the Negro should fight for complete equality in all things, social as well as economic equality. This was a period when the Urban League had a dominant philosophy of opportunity, not ~~alone~~ almo, but gave most of its time merely to securing subordinate and menial jobs for Negroes. These were the things I opposed, and claimed that Negroes should have any and all equality. This was the kind of program I carried on, as secretary of the NAACP in Pittsburgh. Specifically and concretely the outstanding struggle at this period there was for the placing of Negro teachers in the public schools of Pittsburgh.

c: There was no segregation in the Pittsburgh public schools at that time?

McKinney: No segregation of any kind, except that they would not employ Negroes as teachers.

Q: How successful were you in your effort to get teachers on the school staffs?

McKinney: We were not successful at that time, but there's no problem in this connection in Pittsburgh today.

Q: Could you give the approximate dates that you were NAACP regional secretary.

McKinney: Probably 1920-21-22.

Q: Then it was after that that you began doing your newspaper writing?

McKinney: I was doing the newspaper writing at the same time. First I was editor of a paper called the Pittsburgh American. That paper failed. Then I became a writer and columnist for the Pittsburgh Courier.

Q: Was the Pittsburgh American in competition with the Courier?

McKinney: Yes.

Q: And about how long did it continue while you were editor?

McKinney: I was editor twice, for a total period of probably five years.

Q: Why did the paper fail finally?

McKinney: Insufficient financial resources.

Q: You couldn't get the advertising?

McKinney: Didn't get the advertising and didn't get the circulation.

Q: How was its circulation at that time, compared with the Courier?

McKinney: Very much smaller than the Courier at that time. We had a circulation at the top of only about 10,000, in the country as a whole.

Q: Let's go on now to your first labor organizing activity, which you mentioned as the CPLA. Can you tell us a little bit about the organization and what your role in it was?

McKinney: The CPLA was formed about 1929 by A.J. Muste, who at that

time was head of Brookwood Labor College. The organization arose out of differences of opinion, theoretical and radical ~~technical~~ ~~differences~~ with the Communist Party ~~of that period~~. The organizers of the CPLA agreed fully with the militancy of the Communist Party, but disagreed with a part of its theoretical program and with its ~~technical~~ tactical approach. The organization took the position that a radical workers' party in the United States would have to give detailed attention to American history, American traditions, and would have to be composed of honest-to-goodness rank and file native American workers. It would have to have a membership outside of New York City, in various parts of the country where the large industries were.

This is not easy to explain and differentiate without concrete examples.

Q: Why don't we go into a concrete example or so, so that you can illustrate this situation?

McKinney: For instance, sometimes the Communist Party member who was participating in a demonstration would get himself or herself chained to a telegraph pole or a lamp post, so that the police would have difficulty getting him or her away, therefore they could remain and finish their speech. The CPLA was not in principle

opposed to such procedures, but we felt that it was carried to unnecessary lengths, and at times became nearly an expression of hysteria by one redundant.

During the days of the unemployed activity, one of the things which distinguished the unemployed organization to which I belonged --which I'll talk about more later -- from the Unemployed Councils, which was the organization fostered by the Communist Party, can be explained by pointing out a concrete case. We used to have eviction demonstrations, to stop a member of the organization or a non-member from being evicted from his house during the Depression for the non-payment of rent. One concrete illustration in Pittsburgh: the Unemployed League had an agreement with the Unemployed Councils to get together and demonstrate together against the evictions. The Unemployed League arrived at the time of the eviction, chased the deputy sheriff away, kept the family in the house, and when our task was done, we left. The Unemployed Councils came an hour or so later. The demonstration was over, the deputy sheriff was gone, the family was in the house -- but they demonstrated and picketted anyhow, carried out their picketing with slogans and shouts, attracted the police, who came down and made arrests for disorderly conduct. This is a concrete illustration of what I am talking about when I say we had differences with the Unemployed Councils as to methods of procedure, tactics. We had no differences with them on the point that it was correct to stop the deputy

sheriff and the police from evicting the family. We had no dispute with them on that matter. It was on the matter of how you accomplish it. We were dead set against holding a demonstration in an exhibitionist manner or for the purpose merely of creating turmoil. Our aim in all these cases was to accomplish something, such as keeping a family in its house and not having it set out in the street.

Q: Are you suggesting here that at that time, the organizations dominated by the Communists were not really attempting to achieve a specific objective except turmoil?

McKinney: No, I'm not claiming that. That is sometimes contended, but that isn't true. They had, so far as the rank and file were concerned, the same objectives that we had; but the necessities of politics, as conceived by Stalin in this period, made many political shifts necessary. Sometimes they were friendly with what they called the middle class, and sometimes they were not. At this period, when they were friendly, they would organize a "peoples' front;" at other periods they would be opposed to such theories and practices as the organization of a peoples' front, and they would be very vehemently against it. Their membership did not always know what the line of the organization was, and it was very difficult for them to follow it. This was one of the things that made the trouble, that made the turmoil. The turmoil was not created by the

bulk and mass of the workers, certainly, in the Communist Party and in their unemployed organizations. They were no different from the workers in our organization. The difference was in the leadership, the concepts of the leadership. We were native Americans who had some knowledge of the history of the country and some knowledge of the needs of the working class in this country, in its struggle against capitalism. And our center was in this country. We did not have to consult, or be concerned with the needs of, a bureaucracy in another country.

Q: Now, before you joined the CPLA, how close were you to any of the functionaries in the Communist controlled organization?

McKinney: Before I joined the CPLA, I was very friendly. I was known as a very good friend of the Communist Party organization in Pittsburgh. I knew personally all the leaders of the organization and was very friendly with them.

Q: Who were some of their key leaders in Pittsburgh at that time, with whom you were friendly?

McKinney: Fred Merrick was district organizer, District 5. William Scarvil, a Negro, was one of the leaders of the party and was a personal friend. Later, when we were concerned in the

unemployed activities, Phil Frankfeld was the secretary of the Unemployed Councils in Pittsburgh. They were the important people that I really had very close contact with.

Q: Let's get a little further into CPLA, if you'll give a few more details of your role in CPLA, and then what finally happened after that.

McKinney: That will come up in discussion of the unemployed movement.

Q: All right. Would you like to go into the discussion of the unemployed movement now, then?

McKinney: All of the mass organizations and the peripheral organizations, like the Unemployed Councils, the Unemployed League, the Organizations Against War and Fascism, and various other organizations, particularly those organizations of the workers, were organized or sponsored by radical political parties. The Unemployed Councils was the unemployed organization of the Communist Party. The National Unemployment/ Unemployed League, of which I was a member and a leader, was the unemployed organization of the Conference for Progressive Labor Action, which later transformed itself into the American Workers Party.

The Socialist Party also had its members organize an unemployed organization, and it was called the Workers Alliance. I emphasize the fact that these unemployed organizations were formed by politics, because there was a part of the program of these political parties, and the only way that they would really get organized was for them to be organized by organizations like the political parties.

Now, aside from those reasons which I have given for the organization of the National Unemployed League and the Workers Alliance of the Socialist Party, for instance, it must be said that in the course of carrying out its political line, its political theory, one of the radical parties would go into the field of organizing the unemployed during a Depression. Therefore we in the American Workers Party, the old CPLA, got busy and organized the National Unemployed League. The NUL, as we called it, was under the leadership of the American Workers Party, just as the Unemployed Councils were under the leadership of the Communist Party and the Workers Alliance was under the leadership of the Socialist Party.

There isn't time to go into all the reasons which may justify this procedure. There are people, of course, who claim that political parties have no right to carry on such activities, but this could be refuted very easily. However, that isn't necessary for this record, in my opinion.

The organization was formed by individuals in the American Workers Party, living in various parts of the country, from Seattle, Washington, to New York City, and as far South as Gulf Port, Mississippi. The League was organized on a local basis, and on a state basis. The individual units were known as lo This was not accidental -- it was very important - because we were attempting to emulate, and get a form of organization, as clo to the regular trade union organizations as possible, and we were trying to inculcate in these unemployed workers (many of whom had been in the organized labor movement, many thousands had not) that they must become a part of the regular labor movement. It was a part of our theoretical concept, in connection with the organizati that we did not want a continuation of unemployed organizations. We wanted the day to come when unemployed organizations would be done away with and there would only be organizations of employed workers of various kinds.

We went back into American history, into the colonial period, and adopted the Rattlesnake Flag as the flag and emblem of the NUL. We had the flag, just as it had existed in colonial days, with the "Don't Tread on Me" legend under the serpent.

There also arose in the organization a slogan which was not formed by the leadership. It arose out of the ranks: "Feed us or we will fight."

I mention these things because they have some connection with what kind of an organization it was and what its program was.

The leadership, being also a part of the leadership of a revolutionary Socialist Party, proceeded from a belief that society has a class structure. I go into this because it was very conscious, and not accidental. This was a very conscious and a very important part of our procedure, as we went about organizing the unemployed in this period. And we said, "These are workers. They are merely unemployed workers." We had to emphasize this concretely when we came to deal concretely with the problems of unemployment that the workers were faced with -- these problems of getting something to eat, getting a place to live, getting electricity in the house, getting gas to cook with, and getting clothes to wear -- because the theory on which the relief authorities proceeded was that they were handing out charity. It was a very specific contribution of the NUL to the discussion and the history of this period: that this was not charity. We said that this pittance of relief which these unemployed workers were getting is some unpaid wages which they should have had when they were working, but which they did not get, which their employers kept as profits and put into their own pockets.

This was concretely a carrying into action concretely, in the adoption of slogans, of the theoretical position which we adopted and which we adhered to in the organization of the

unemployed. The unemployed accepted this. They understood it. And it was not unusual to have one of the rank and file unemployed members rise in a meeting when somebody proposed that they go out and sell apples, and make a speech in which he claimed, "This is not a begging organization. This is a fighting organization."

This became the dominant expression of opinion and the dominant motive which actuated the members of the unemployed.

Next, we took the position that relief should be administered by and supplied by the Federal government. Now, when one sits down now and contemplates the activities of the Federal government in the social security field, it is perhaps not easy to realize that in the thirties, from 1929 through the thirties, this was not the case, and the Unemployed League was here waging a pioneer fight for things which people now take for granted. Relief in this period was administered by the state, and the money came from the state, and no money came from the Federal government. Our demand was that the Federal government provide the money, and that the Federal government administer the relief; that the unemployed worker should be treated as a worker, not as a beggar but as a worker who simply had no work to do, through no fault of his own. These things had to be emphasized over and over again, very definitely and very clearly, because we came up against a very interesting phenomenon in connection with the charity organizations.

For instance, the Family Society in Pittsburgh, which is a

casework organization like most of the charity organizations in cities, ~~who~~ administered the relief in Pittsburgh ~~and administered it~~ to the unemployed as though they were cases, the same as cases ~~that~~ they'd dealt with before the depression. We had to emphasize also that there were no psychological problems here, except the psychological problems attendant on unemployment. These people are not demented, they are not derelicts, they are not begging. They're simply normal people, normal human beings who are out of work through no fault of their own and therefore cannot provide themselves with the necessities of life.

This was a long fight that we had to carry on, to demonstrate this. We demanded complete social security. This was long before -- ~~not long before, but before~~ Social Security as it is known today came into being.

At the beginning of the depression, relief in Pittsburgh was 90¢ per person per week. That is, a family of five on relief got $4.50, for food, clothing and shelter. In some cities, like New York, it was higher, but in most places it was lower, particularly in the South.

One of the other problems of a theoretical and practical nature with which we concerned ourselves was the rise and activity of the so-called self-help organizations. These were organizations, organized by the unemployed themselves, usually by some individual who had some notions about the formation of cooperatives. There were many of those around the country, and the employers, the people

in the National Association of Manufacturers and the United States Chamber of Commerce, such people, were advocating and supporting the [redacted] organizations. To took the position that this is nonsense. The poor, the unemployed, could not possibly help themselves, unless they took over the economy. There was no way for the unemployed to help themselves in an economy administered by somebody else. And we pointed out that this was silly, that it was a trap that the unemployed could fall into, and that they would be just as hungry after a session in these self-help organizations as they were before.

It is an historical fact that this turned out to be the case. They all went out of existence long before the depression was over, and many of them became members of one of the unemployed organizations.

I want to point out, however, to make the historical record adequate, that in its tactical approach to the problem, there were times when we did not talk against the idea of self-help organizations. Sometimes we used the notion to get something that we wanted. As an illustration, we were holding the -- The Pennsylvania Unemployed League was holding its annual convention in Harrisburg, and we faced a problem of how to get the unemployed from Pittsburgh to Harrisburg. We had some tumbledown trucks and motorcycles and various broken-down conveyances that could get there, if there was any oil and gasoline to put in them. We went to [redacted] a nationally known oil company

~~[illegible]~~ -- and explained to them that the unemployed were going to meet in Harrisburg to ~~discuss~~ ways and means of ~~[illegible]~~ helping themselves. We had no difficulty whatsoever, ~~[illegible]~~ ~~office~~. We got adequate oil and adequate gasoline to last us not only ~~to Pittsburgh and back~~ -- to Harrisburg and back -- but for use in ~~some weeks after we had returned to~~ Pittsburgh, ~~to travel around~~ for several weeks after the convention. ~~Pittsburgh carrying on our activities there.~~ They were anxious to render assistance to any organization of the unemployed that said its purpose was to help itself, so that the corporations and other people of a like nature would not have to pay taxes to support the unemployed.

Another point which needs to be emphasized for a full understanding of the National Unemployed League is that we took the industrial form of organization, and advocated that the trade unions adopt the industrial or vertical form of organization. This, it must be remembered, was before the formation of the CIO, which of course is an industrial or vertical union. What we attempted to do here was carry out our political progrm and our political notions, to apply them in this situation with the unemployed: that working class organizations shbuld take the vertical or industrial form and not the form of the craft unions.

I want tomention here also that many of the leaders of the NUL became leaders in the CIO after it was formed. There are many CIO leaders, many leaders in the merged labor movement today, who got their first training in the National Unemployed League.

Now, it is necessary to say something about the practice of the National Unemployed League, the concrete application by the unemployed workers of these principles which had their source in the political thinking and in the political program of the American Workers Party at that time. As an illustration, once in Pittsburgh we discovered, through the assistance of school principals and teachers, that there were many children out of school because they had no shoes to wear. At one time we got the names of 4500 children that were not in school because they had no shoes. We immediately went to the mayor and demanded that certain funds which the city had should be used to buy shoes. The man who was mayor then, Mr. McNair, took the position that if we aided him to get across his singletax program, that there would be no need for unemployed relief and no barefoot children in Pittsburgh. The League, not being favorable to the program of the singletax organization, then proceeded to ask City Council for a hearing on the matter. The Council granted the hearing.

It has to be emphasized here that in a large majority of the instances throughout the country where the National Unemployed League demanded a hearing from city council or from a state legislature, that the hearing was granted, grudgingly, and was only granted because the council felt the pressure and the insistence --sometimes even the physical pressure-- of the organized unemployed workers against them. And these concessions, these

hearings were secured by putting pressure on them. This has to be emphasized because it is a fact. Virtually no legislature nor any city council in the country wanted to grant any hearings to workers ~~[illegible]~~ organizations.

At this particular hearing, we went around among the unemployed, gathered up old shoes, ragged underwear, ragged clothing of other sorts -- three bags full -- took it into the City Council Building in Pittsburgh, kept it downstairs while the hearing was proceeding upstairs, and while the leaders of the organization were speaking to the nine City Councilmen, and at a certain time, a messenger was sent downstairs to bring the clothing -- the ragged shoes, the ragged underwear-- up. And we placed this ragged clothing in front of each Councilman, so that he would have a real demonstration of what it was we were fighting for, and what it was human beings were forced to wear because they had no work.

This is an illustration merely of the way we proceeded concretely to apply the principles which we espoused.

At another time, in Columbus, Ohio, the Franklin County Unemployed League asked Govenor White for a hearing on the question of unemployment, ~~the Governor of Ohio.~~ Governor White refused. But the leaders of the League had been wise enough to place between 7 and 10 thousand of the unemployed on the capitol lawn, before the committee went in to ask the governor for a hearing.

William Truax, the leader of the delegation, called the governor to the window and said: "Governor, do you see what's out there on the Capitol lawn?"

The governor said, "Yes," and then Bill Truax said, "Well, do you want all of the inside the Capitol?"

It was then that Governor White decided to have the hearing and to negotiate with the leaders of the unemployed organization.

In Pittsburgh, we learned that in the East Liberty section there were stored many sacks of government surplus flour that had not been distributed to the unemployed. When we learned about this, Local 2 of the Unemployed League in East Liberty decided that it would distribute the flour. They went to the warehouse, broke the door open, took the flour out, and distributed it to its members for whom it had been originally intended.

In the Lawrenceville section of Pittsburgh at one time it became necessary to use this kind of pressure and activity against the relief station there. The Lawrenceville unit of the League took over the relief station and held it for 59 days, and operated the relief station.

Later, at a hearing in Harrisburg at the state capital, before a joint session of the legislature, when the legislature was showing no intention of paying attention to the requests and demands of the unemployed, a banner was unfurled in the capital

chamber bearing the legend, and setting forth the information, that this was the organization that had besieged the relief station in Lawrenceville in Pittsburgh for 59 days. This seemed to have some effect on the members of the legislature, and they were inclined to listen more carefully and more attentively to what the unemployed had to say.

These are illustrations of the way the unemployed were forced to proceed all over the country, in the face of very obstinate refusal to negotiate with their representatives or ~~to make efforts~~ to increase the relief. When President Roosevelt, in running for reelection in 1936, made a speech to the group called the economic royalists, he made a statement like this: "I saved you. If it had not been for the measures which my administration took, there would have been rioting and fighting in the streets."

It is ~~correct and~~ accurate to say that Mr. Roosevelt was correct, that the unemployed organizations were prepared to act in this manner and to carry through any activities which were necessary to provide themselves with food, clothing and shelter.

Q: What was the ethnic makeup of the unemployed movement?

McKinney: The unemployed movement was a real cross-section of the

American population. It not only took what we called "the proletarians" but also a large part of the middle class who were abo to be dispossessed and put out of their houses. We had any number of people in the unemployed organization who had been making 10 to 15 thousand dollars a year, which was a high income for that period. Not only that, but it was a cross-section of the population from the standpoint of employment. We had mechanics, we had clerks and foremen, we had doctors, we had lawyers, we had social workers in the movement. As a matter of fact, the way we got our clerical and office and legal work done was because we had members that could do this kind of work. We had mechanics of all kinds.

One other thing that I might emphasize is that during this period, the organized regular labor movement was passive. It was doing virtually nothing. And no activity took place in the labor movement until John L. Lewis and his associates began the activity r the organization of the CIO in 1936. The labor movement was entirely passive.

We had said, first, before we began to organize the unemployed, that this should have been done by the regular labor movement. They should have organized the unemployed. But they did not, and there are very good reasons, theoretical and practical, why the organized labor movement did not do it. It was not prepared in its thinking for making the kind of demands which we made, nor for carrying on the kind of practical activities

which we carried on. This came, however, with the formation of the CIO. The CIO really took over -- ~~or, not took over, really, espoused or organized~~ or adopted basically the program of the National Unemployed League.

Q: How did this develop? How did the CIO come into being and take over the work of the NUL?

McKinney: There had been agitation by the radical political parties in the country for decades for the industrial or vertical form of organization. This had been going on for decades. But the AF of L, which was the trade union organization then, organized by the craft unions, was opposed to the industrial form of organization and, I'm sorry to say, many of these organizations are opposed today. They remain opposed to the industrial form of organization and favor the craft form.

We used to say that the Carpenters and the Electricians and the Plumbers and the Printers and the Typographers were the aristocracy of labor.

But in the course of time, Lewis got it through his head that the mass production workers should be organized. I had some knowledge of the struggle that went on among steelworkers because I had been a participant in the great steel strike of 1919, which was led by William Z. Foster who later became one of the leaders of the Communist Party. And the effort then was to

organize the steelworkers into an industrial union.

It might be said here, in emphasizing the importance of the Negro in the economic scene, that one of the causes of the failure of the steel strike of 1919 was the fact that the steel companies? unions were able to bring in Negroes from the South and use them as scabs and integrate them into the steel industry. I personally talked to Foster about this before the influx began, but had some difficulty making Foster understand that there was a danger of Negro workers coming in and being used as scabs and being used to break the strike.

I had one other experience with this. In 1933, in Western Pennsylvania, the whole of the bituminous coal industry was on strike. This was what was known as a wildcat strike. All of the ~~Lewis/Lore~~ leaders of the Coal Miners Union, from Lewis down, were busy trying to get the miners back to work. The strike had been organized by the president of one local, Martin Ryan, and all of the coal miners of Western Pennsylvania were on strike. This was just before the coming of the NIRA in 1933. At one mine, one company decided to bring Negro miners from the South, put them to work in the mine to break the strike. I participated with some others in protesting this procedure. At one mine, Negro miners were housed on a hillside, and it became necessary to go there and talk to them and tell them that they could not break that strike, that if

they attempted to break that strike they would be shot down with machine guns.

Very interesting thing took place one day in the course of this activity. State police came up and said, the Negroes on the hill were going into the mine. The miners' pickets, armed with machine guns, said they were not going in. It was then that some of us decided we would explain to these innocent Negroes who did not know why they had been brought North that they should not attempt to go into the mine, that the miners meant business, and that they would be slaughtered.

Q: How did your role in the NUL end, and what did you shift to after that, and how did that all come about?

McKinney: That is a question which needs to be dealt with.

After the American Workers Party merged with an organization called the Communist League of America, that is, the AWA merged with the CLA -- the CLA was the Trotskyist political movement in this country. About a year after this merger, a proposal was made in the new organization(which was called the Workers Party of the United States) that this party enter the Socialist Party. This was an application of a political notion which had been advanced by Trotsky which came to be known as the French Turn.

Trotsky had advocated that the French Trotskyists enter the French Socialist Party, and they had entered. About a year later, as I have said, the proposal was made that the Workers Party, the Trotskyist movement in the United States, enter the Socialist Party.

To facilitate this movement and to get it accomplished to the satisfaction of the leaders of the Socialist Party, the leaders of the Workers Party of the United States demanded and advised that the National Unemployed League merge with the Workers Alliance, the unemployed organization of the Socialist Party. This demand caused a great upheaval in the Workers Party, and was opposed by those of us who had been instrumental in forming the NUL and who were not in agreement with some of the political principles, ideas and practice of what we began to call the Professional Trotskyists.

However, we were a minority. The merger was effected. The Trotskyists entered the Socialist Party. And that was the end of the National Unemployed League.

Q: Mr. McKinney, what were you personally doing at the time that this merger took place, and where did you go from there?

McKinney: At the time the merger took place, I was carrying on activities in the National Unemployed League. That was where my chief

activity was, as a member of this political organization, and there is one thing that I forgot to mention, which is the fact that we had a newspaper called Mass Action and I was its editor. I was editing this NUL newspaper called Mass Action. I was traveling around the country, helping to organize these various demonstrations and marches. And in the summer of 1936, after the Unemployed League had been virtually made non-existent by merger with the workers Alliance, for reasons which I have given above, I became an organizer of the CIO in the Steelworkers Organizing Committee, and was stationed in Youngstown, Ohio.

My especial task was to attempt to sell the CIO, particularly the Steelworkers Organizing Committee, to Negroes. One of the stumbling blocks to carrying on this activity -- any activity in connection with the organization of steel -- was the large spy system operated by the steel companies. If a steel organizer went to a steelworker's house, this steelworker might be told the next day that he was no longer wanted in the mill. He was fired. As an illustration of this sort of business -- one morning I walked out of the place where I lived, and a car was parked in front of the house with two men in it. I walked about six blocks, to the YMCA cafeteria to eat my breakfast. The men followed me, came into the cafeteria and sat down while I ate. When I left, they followed me down to the building where the steel office was, got in the same elevator with me, and rode up to the floor where I got

off to go into the Steelworkers Organizing Committee office. They stayed there until I came out, and everywhere I went that day they followed me.

Needless to say, I did not do any organizing that day. This went on for a whole week. Later, I had assembled by private conversation, a secret meeting, about eight Negroes who were to meet in a certain secret place todiscuss the general expansion of the organizing drive, particularly as it affected Negroes. Two days later I learned that all the steel companies in Youngstown knew that this meeting had taken place, which only meant that the company had a stoolpigeon among the small group of eight that I had selected.

However, we were successful, as is known, because the Steelworkers are now organized into the United Steelworkers.

Q: Mr. McKinney, could you go into more details, concerning the full extent of your early CIO organizing work and what difficulties you had, what incidents occurred to you? Were you ever beaten? etc

McKinney: One of the difficulties, in certain areas, was to find a place to meet. For instance, in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, where Jones and Laughlin Steel Corp. had a mill and where the town was at that time controlled politically by the Jones and

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Laughlin Steel Corporation, we could not rent a hall to meet in. Nobody would rent us a place to meet, at the demand of the steel company.

In Wierton, West Virginia, which at that time was private property -- the whole city was private property, I don't know about now, whether or not it is an incorporated city, but at that time it was private property -- we went in one morning to make contact with steelworkers for organizing, and were literally beaten and clubbed out of the town by the steel company goons of Mr. Mier's Wierton Steel Company.

Q: How many of you went in to organize, and about how many goons came out against you?

McKinney: Well, as far as I can remember -- this was a long time ago -- there were eight or ten of us. The number of goons, I could not say, because if you get hit across the head by a club you might think there are ten people when there's only one. But they were more than we. The steel companies and the coal companies of Western Pennsylvania never hesitated to spend money for goons and strikebreakers.

Q: You say they were armed with clubs -- what were these, big sticks, billies?

McKinney: Clubs. Big clubs.

Q: Were you, as organizers, armed in any way?

McKinney: No. We were very careful about that. If we were armed, we'd be sure to get arrested by the police.

Q: How long did you continue organizing for the CIO, and then what happened?

McKinney: I stayed with the CIO for a year and a half. Then I returned to the Workers Party, the Socialist Workers Party -- that was the name of the party then/ to which I belonged. I returned to become the party organizer in Newark, N.J., in Essex county in northern New Jersey. I had had some conflict with Mr. Philip Murray, the head of the Steelworkers Organizing Committee, because I had refused to pass out a paper allegedly put out by some friends of the Steelworkers, but which was really a political paper put out by the Communist Party. I had refused to distribute this among steelworkers. But the basic reason for my return was to ~~make~~ take up straight political activity again, and I became, as I said, the party's organizer in northern New Jersey, where my activities as a steel organizer continued, because we had steelworkers in the party branch in Newark and at one time we had as many as -- or there were as many as nine strikes in the various plants organized by the Steelworkers in northern New Jersey, which I

participated in and helped to operate.

Q: Then you were in a dual role, party organizer and still a steelworker's union organizer, is that right?

McKinney: No, I wasn't. I participated in this organizing of steel really as a party organizer. We had members of the party who were on the Steelworkers' payroll and they were really the Steelworkers' organizers. If it had been known that they were members of the party, they would have been dismissed as organizers by Mr. Murray. Mr. Murray made no distinction between radicals. There was no distinction made by him between a member of the Communist Party and a member of the Workers Party or a member of the Socialist Party. They were all alike. I believe that toward the end of his life he began to understand that the three parties were not identical.

Q: Do you believe that he saw no ideological distinctions between them, or among them? or was it simply a matter of control of his own organization that he was building?

McKinney: It was based on two things. Phil Murray was a very devout Catholic, with all of the opinions of the Catholic Church against radicalism. And secondly, he did not understand the ideological differences. It would have been very difficult to

explain them to Phil Murray and make him understand it. It took Phil Murray, for instance, a long time to understand that the Communist Party was a peculiar kind of institution which was anti-working class in a way, for instance, which the Socialist Party certainly was not. But Mr. Murray did not understand this, and it would have been very difficult to make him understand it.

I remember his opposing, when Reuther had the slogan for the automobile industry, "Open the books," Murray was opposed to this slogan. He was opposed to it (1) because he didn't understand it; (2) because what he did understand about the labor movement, which was considerable, made him wince at having a slogan of this kind. He later explained, "If you have a slogan like this, you don't give the employer any chance to retreat. You don't give him any chance to bargain."

He had the same attitude in connection with other slogans which were advanced for the automobile industry about this time by Walter Reuther.

Q: This suggests, then, that Reuther and Murray had considerably different intellects. Is this true?

McKinney: That's absolutely true. Murray learned a lot of things before he died, however. But at the period I'm talking

about, Murray had no understanding whatsoever -- none -- of the political implications even in the activities which he was carrying on himself. He never understood it.

Q: You mentioned a moment ago a newspaper that he wanted you, as an organizer, to distribute, which you considered a Communist front newspaper. Didn't he recognize it as such?

McKinney: He didn't know the difference between a Communist front or a Communist rear or a Communist middle. He was against Communists, but he didn't know one when he saw one. Furthermore, he had a tendency to accept help from any source. Now, there was nothing wrong about this, provided you understand what it is you're getting.

We took the attitude once, in a certain connection, we'd take help from the Devil, but we insisted on knowing it was the Devil we were getting the help from, so we wouldn't be fooled, and would know how to deal with the Devil later.

I remember Trotsky saying once, in a certain connection, "You'll make a united front with the Devil against Fascism." But of course, you know it's the Devil, and that you're going to have to do something about him later, after you get rid of Fascism.

Murray was an old line trade union leader who had come up in the rough -- very, very devoted to the labor movement, a very

courageous man, a man who had participated in all manner of the bloody struggles of the Miners, and had but one aim in life, so far as organization was concerned, and that was to be the leader of a successful organization of workers. There's no question about that. But his understanding was meagre, particularly for the period of transition that the labor movement was going through at the time the CIO was being formed. Murray didn't understand what the CIO was. He really didn't understand the social implications in the organization of the mass production industries. He came to learn many, many things. He was an old time miner who understood only one thing -- "Give us more wages and shorter hours." That was a very, very simple program. That was the program of John L. Lewis for a considerable period.

Q: Why do you think that Murray and also Lewis learned or understood the other dimensions of the labor movement and became more aware of theoretical concepts?

McKinney: Out of their experience with the steel manufacturers and the coal operators and various other groups they learned a great deal. ~~experiences that they had.~~ And they had Reuther there as an example. Reuther, who knew something about these things, was a member of the Socialist Party once and knows something about the

social and sociological aspects of these things; he was continually advancing programs which were new in the labor movement. Murray rejected them, but he came to accept a good many of them because his experience taught him that. And that's the way John L. Lewis came to it. It took John L. Lewis a long, long time before he would ever accept the necessity for social security, for a welfare fund for the Miners, because these old fashioned labor leaders, their notion was: "You fight over wages and hours, nothing else." But they changed.

As I said, it came out of their exoerience. They never did understand it thoroughly. And I want to emphasize that Murray did not understand what was implied in the organization of mass production workers in 1936 -- that the world was changing, the country was changing, a lot of things were happening. Murray did not understand or appreciate the democratic procedure in the United Automobile Workers. The United Automobile Workers, at one time at least, was a very very democratic organization. I sat in their convention once and heard Murray get up to speak, and he was really bewildered at the free democratic expression of opinion in the UAW convention. Nothing like that took place in the Steelworkers' convention. Now, [redacted], under MacDonald this democracy has gone out the window.

[illegible]

E.R. McKinney - 19 April 1961 - by Ed Edwin.

Q: Mr. McKinney, to go back to the organizing of the unemployed, what were some of the practical aspects of bringing in members, holding members, doing things for members? How about the travel facets, clerical work, andall the rest?

Mr. McKinney: First, it has to be remembered and recorded that when we were starting the organization, we didn't know anything about it at all. We'd had no experience with this type of thing, and nobody else had had any experience with this type of thing. There had been some demonstrations back in the seventies, but nobody knew anything about how to handle the situations which existed with the great Depression which began in 1929. So we had to start new, and work it out as a virgin activity.

For instance, in Pittsburgh we had a stroke of luck. We were having a meeting one evening at which some middle class people, and one or two people who were property owners, were present, to help the unemployed help themselves. And one old lady came up and told us that she had a building down on Water St. that she would let us use. We went down and examined the building and found that it was a three storey building that ran from Water St. back to First Avenue. That is, it was a

block long. This became our unemployed headquarters.

Now this was the custom, as a matter of fact, all around the country. The other NUL organizations began to work around among people that were sympathetic, to get headquarters free. Usually these headquarters were obtained from elderly women who were property owners and who were sympathetic toward the plight of the unemployed. We got broken-down trucks and broken-down motorcycles and repaired them ourselves, and this gave us our means of transportation and the means of hauling our goods around.

In the matter of functioning, or in another aspect of our functioning, I might mention the experiences which we had with the police in the matter of holding demonstrations. ~~For instance, it was the practice of the police, when we were going to have a meeting on an open lot, [illegible] to get permission from the owners of a lot to use it for~~ an open meeting. We ~~prized~~ desired the unemployed to assemble in the street, because we wanted people to see them: to see that we were meeting, that we were organizing, and to hear what we had to say about ourselves.

When we had these meetings, it was always the practice of the police to assemble there, on horseback -- 10, 15, 25 policemen --about a half an hour before the meeting was to begin. We understood that this was a means of intimidating the

populace to keep them from attending the meeting.

Furthermore, in getting a permit to hold the meeting, after we'd gotten the permission of the owner to use the lot, we had to go to the police to get a permit for an open air meeting. We were usually asked some question of this kind: "Mr. So and so, do you believe in the Constitution of the United States?"

This is a very easy way to get a permit, of course, because all that was necessary was to say, "Yes, Inspector" or "Yes, Captain, we believe thoroughly in the Constitution of the United States."

We had other experiences with police and deputy sheriffs. For instance, the matter of evictions. It was a practice of the organization; whenever it could be done, when ever a family was evicted, to go to the house where the eviction had taken place and either put the furniture back in the house, or in some instance in numerous cities in the country, as a dramatic gesture, we would set up housekeeping for the family in the street. The bed would be set up just as though it were inside, the stove would be set up and wood would be brought, the fires would be made with wood: the family would live in the street and sleep in the street. They'd do all their cooking in the street, just as though they were inside the house.

In one or two places, the police moved in and beat up the family, after the cooking had started.

One thing that should be mentioned, in connection with the evictions -- because the question might be raised from time to time: How was it possible for the unemployed organizations to stop the evictions? When the legal notices had been served on a family, the unemployed would go to the house, ~~xhxxxx~~ chase the constable or the deputy sheriff, and stop the eviction. One aid in this was the fact that the police departments did not participate in these evictions. Eviction notices were always a matter of the county, and were served by constables and deputy sheriffs, by county officers, and the local police had no jurisdiction in the matter. Therefore, we had a simpler time to get rid of one deputy sheriff than we would have had to get rid of a whole platoon of police on horseback or motorcycle, or on foot.

I should like to mention, in the matter of the structure of the NUL, that it was organized on a local, a county, a state and a national basis. The smallest unit was the local. It was deliberately called "a local" to emulate the labor movement, because it was our intention, in form and in idea to conform as closely to the labor movement as possible; to emphasize at all times that we considered ourselves a part of the labor movement, even though the orthodox labor movement at that time did not consider us a part of the labor movement.

Finally, I should like to mention -- to emphasize again

the procedure of the National Unemployed League in assisting the labor movement. I point to a concrete example of the Autolite strike in Toledo, Ohio. This strike took place in 1933, I believe. Here the National Unemployed League, under its own banner, with its rattlesnake banner on the picket line, participated in this strike. This was an extremely novel departure from trade union practice, and of course could not have been done if the strike had been under the jurisdiction of certain more conservative elements in the labor movement. But the National Unemployed League supplied pickets, carried its banner, and participated in all aspects of the strike in connection with the Auto-Lite Company in Toledo, Ohio.

Q. To go back to the practical aspects again for a moment, as for some of the unemployed who were living out in the streets and so forth, what did they do for utilities? To what degree did you attempt to help them in a very personal way? Was this comparable to ward politics, for example?

McKinney: The practice of the Unemployed League, where gas was turned off, was to turn the gas on. We had procured these long instruments called keys that were used for turning gas on, from the front of the house; and when the gas was turned off,

we would go to the house and turn the gas on, and the family would have gas to use until the gas company discovered that the gas had been turned on. The gas company finally resorted to the practice -- when they turned the gas off -- of filling the hole with crushed rock so that we could not get the key down in there.

In the matter of electricity, when it was turned off, there were various methods to be used -- attaching a wire to some house that had electricity, where the family was sympathetic, and bypassing the meter, and bringing electricity into the house where the current had been turned off. There were various other methods of getting electricity, where there was no money to pay for it, and every possible scheme was used to see to it that the unemployed had gas and electricity and water. There were skillful mechanics who were merely out of work and were members of the organization, who were skillful enough to do these things. Most of the unemployed, therefore, for a season at least, would have gas and water and electricity.

Q: What about the families that had been evicted, that were out in the street? Did you set up electrical wires bringing lamps to their encampments in the streets? How did that work?

McKinney: No, it wasn't necessary to do that, because, as I mentioned before, when we set up housekeeping in the street this didn't last very long. This didn't last long for several reasons. It was an exposure of the community: that people had no houses to live in. And the leading citizens in the community did not appreciate this type of exposure. Either a charity organization, or the relief organization would provide the family with a new home, or they would be taken in by some other family of unemployed or some family of the employed. But the point I want to emphasize is: they did not remain in the streets. This would not be tolerated because, as I said, it was too much of a stark exposure.

Q: Did you couple this exposure with speeches, orations designed to strike at the consciences of the leading citizens of the community?

McKinney: No. We did this when we held meetings. That was one of the functions of the outdoor meetings we held, and also one of the functions of the indoor meetings. It was also the function of hearings which we held before city councils, before state legislatures; and also this was taken up in the bulletins of various kinds, in various places, which the unemployed organizations issued. The one in Pittsburgh for instance, the monthly bulletin

that was mimeographed, was named Demonstrate.

Q: What about the general press and radio coverage? How did they handle this situation as it developed?

McKinney: The general press and radio reacted to this as they usually react to things which they are opposed to. They only gave publicity to our activities when the activities had taken on such a nature that they considered it news -- or sensational news. That is, they would cover a demonstration. They would cover a meeting at which we said we were going to demonstrate, or we were going to break into the warehouse and take out the food and distribute it ourselves. But for ordinary coverage of the routine of the organization, this was not done.

Q: Does this mean also that there were no interpretative reports before some extreme action took place or some extreme development occurred? Does it mean that nobody reported on the extent of unemployment and the fact that it was building up into a crisis situation where there might be such an explosion that then would be sensational news?

McKinney: As a rule, we didn't proceed in that manner. The national organization took care of publicity of that kind, and

propaganda of that kind, as a rule. But it was not our practice to say: if so and so is not done, then there will be an explosion. There were very definite reasons, which will become clearer when I go into some of the political bases of our activities, but I can say here that we were not really concerned with the problem as to whether or not we got publicity as such. We were convinced that the newspapers would be forced to give us publicity, because our actions would be of such a fundamentally militant nature that they would not be able to evade and get around giving us publicity.

We were not concerned with the general problem of maintaining the status quo, which is I think involved in the thinking and activities of people who took the position which Roosevelt took when he was running for re-election in 1936, when he told the "economic royalists" that he was the savior of capitalism and that he had saved them, and if it had not been for the measures which his administration took there would have been rioting in the streets. We had a different orientation and a different outlook. We did not believe that we were solving the problem of the working class by organizing the unemployed and conducting demonstrations.

Q: When you were trying to help the unemployed, what role did this aid take, just in holding the organization together and building it further through human relations?

McKinney: As I have intimated before, and as I will go into toward the end more fully, all of our activity was politically motivated and politically based. We knew, however, that when one is dealing with masses of people in whatever organization, whether economic or social or political, something has to be done concretely that benefits the members and which gives them to understand that they are being benefited. Therefore we had a very practical program in the Unemployed League. We actually got them relief. We actually got them placed on relief, we actually kept them on relief, we fought the relief organization in behalf of the unemployed very concretely. We got food orders for them, we got houses for them to live in, we got clothing for them. We put their furniture back in the house when it was set out in the street. We actually turned their gas on when it had been turned off. We wired their houses for electricity when the current had been cut off. We did very concrete things. We did what all organizations, of whatever kind, have done, when dealing with the masses and trying to get their support: we supplied them with concrete things, with food, clothing and shelter, the basic demands of the masses of the people.

Q: Who actually went about doing this? Did you have squads that went to meet these people and physically did some of this work for them or showed them how to do it? How did this happen?

McKinney: The organization was set up in committees. For instance, there was a committee called a housing committee whose business it was to look after housing. There was a committee called a grievance committee, the general committee that took care of grievances in general. There was a committee called a relief committee that took care of the matter of getting food orders and clothing. These committees all had chairmen. Each local had these committees. The county-wide organization had county committees.

We also had an educational committee in each unit of the organization, because a very important part of our activity was educational activity in which we sought to give these unemployed workers an idea as to what kind of society they lived in, an idea as to what improvements might be made in that society, and an idea how they could participate in improving that society.

In the matter of clerical help, which most of the unemployed could not do -- they had not had training in typing, stenography and bookkeeping -- we as a rule had volunteers from among middle class liberals. These were usually young women who were sympathetic to the organization and volunteered to work for the organization, and carried out all sorts of tasks, even to going on the picket line in unemployed demonstrations. Many of these young people later worked with the CIO. Some of them became CIO organizers, or CIO workers of various kinds, after the CIO was formed.

Q: Regarding the matter of clerical workers in the unemployed situation in Pittsburgh: Mr. McKinney, when you said that you had to go outside the ranks of the unemployed to bring in clerical help, do you mean that there were not large groups of unemployed stenographic workers? If this so, is it because they did not join the group that you were organizing? Or because there was still work for those that were skilled? How far into the ranks of the skilled, especially white collar workers, did unemployment extend during the Depression? Or, did the white collar workers, even if unemployed, fail to join your unemployed group? Was this a class matter, or a division in skills?

McKinney: The unemployment among the white collar workers, the middle class workers, was just as extensive during the Depression as it was among the industrial workers or the real proletarian workers. However, for reasons which are not too difficult to understand, it was easier to organize the unemployed industrial workers. The unemployed industrial workers were accustomed to being organized. They'd been members of unions. Those who had not been members of unions were easy to get into an organization, because the type of work which they had been doing rendered them susceptible to organization, and they were not afraid to go into organizations and fight.

The middle class white collar workers were timid, in most places. They had not been organized. They were not accustomed to organization, and they had been indoctrinated with the notion that they should not be in organizations with the overall workers, with the dungaree workers; that if they had an organization, it should be an organization of their own.

It is really difficult to answer the question why, in Pittsburgh, we had to go outside of the organization. It occurs to me now that we certainly had no stenographers, no unemployed stenographers in the organization. There must be -- I know there were unemployed stenographers in Pittsburgh, however.

This fact probably resulted from two causes -- the one I mentioned before, that the unemployed white collar workers didn't take to organization, didn't take to organization with the dungaree workers; and the fact that we spent a large part of our time, most of our time, trying to get the industrial workers and not the middle class white collar workers, for theoretical and practical reasons. And so we had volunteers to do the clerical work from among young middle class women, mostly social workers, or young middle class women who were the daughters of middle class and upper class families that were going to school and whose parents were supporting them.

Q: How did your find your recruits for the other committees that you mentioned?

McKinney: All the other committees were taken from the membership of the organization itself. This was one thing that we insisted on, that the organization must do its own work. We would pick out from among the membership in the unemployed unit itself all the chairmen of committees; all the officers of the organization were members of the organization. They had to participate in all of the activities of the organization. There were no "decorations." There were no honorary posts. Everybody had to pitch in and do any and all work that was necessary to be done -- picketing, demonstrating, typing, scrubbing the floor. Whatever was necessary to be done, everybody had to hold himself available to do it. There were no posts such as exist in some sections of the labor movement -- then and now.

Q: To go to the relief organization -- you mentioned at one point that you fought the relief organization for the unemployed. What was the obstacle here, as far as relief organization servicing is concerned?

McKinney: Well, there was a very interesting situation in the

relief organization, that we discovered. For instance, a social worker -- that is, the general worker that made the contact with the unemployed in the casework organizations; this person is known as a caseworker in the relief organizations I'm not sure what they're called. But the person in the relief hierarchy lowest down, the one that made visits, the visitor that made contact with the unemployed -- they had the authority to take a person off of relief, without approval of their supervisor, but they could not put an individual on relief without the approval of the supervisor. We discovered this, and this of course taught us a great many things about how the relief system functioned.

We had to carry on our struggle mainly on two fronts, to get people on relief, and to keep them on relief; to get people restored to relief that had been taken off of relief; to get relief increased where we thought it was necessary. None of this was done voluntarily by the relief organization. At all times, pressure had to be maintained.

Now, this was not because the relief organization was composed of devils, of course! It was for other reasons. One reason was, the appropriations were never really sufficient to give adequate relief. This was particularly true before the taking over of relief by the federal government. After the federal government took it over the situation improved, although

even then it was still far from adequate.

And it became necessary for the unemployed to demonstrate at the individual units of the relief set-up, and literally sometimes batter on the door physically to get results.

Q: Could you describe the relief workers, the visitor level particularly, a little more? They weren't devils, you say. What kind of people were these? What kind of sympathy did they really show, and empathy?

McKinney: They were middle class people who were just about as bad off as the unemployed themselves. If it had not been for working in the relief set-up, as relief workers and visitors, they would have been relief recipients themselves.

However, the majority of them seem to have had no appreciation of their real status; and they went about carrying out the notions and ideas of their superiors as though the unemployed were really people who were unemployed just because they did not want to work. We found this to be the general situation. There were others who were sympathetic, and needless to say, the unemployed could make real use of people inside the relief set-up that were sympathetic with their aims. This at times helped to lighten our burden, and also helped to lighten the burden of the relief receivers, because they could stay on relief

times when they might have been taken off if they had had a different type of visitor.

One of the activities of the relief organization that we had to maintain vigilance against was the stool pigeon. There were times when an unemployed worker would be hired, given a job, and he became a fervent supporter of the relief set-up and quite often an informer as to what was going on among the unemployed, and in their organizations.

At times there were people hired who went snooping around among the unemployed to find out who was working, whether or not there were people on relief who were working and making wages and were therefore not eligible for relief, or who were earning more money than was lawful, so to speak, for them to earn while on relief.

We took the position, since the relief was so meagre and since remunerative employment was so rare, that no unemployed man or woman was going to earn more money than they needed to support their family in semi-decency. Therefore, we did not give our sympathy or our support to this kind of procedure. On the contrary, we opposed it. In one city, we went to the head of the relief set-up and told him, if he did not call his snoopers in we were going to beat them up, run them in ourselves.

Q: Did you have much mmmmm trouble finding out who the snoopers and stool pigeons were?

McKinney: Not much difficulty. ~~The unemployed had a pretty good sort.~~ Our intelligence service was in fact better than the intelligence service of the relief agency, and we had no difficulty at all in discovering informers and stoolpigeons, and the turncoats and the snoopers and the meddlers. And the people who felt that it was a disgrace to have demonstrations of unemployed, parades, and various types of activities such as the unemployed carried on.

Q: How did this intelligence service work? Were some of the sympathetic relief workers your contacts, part of the network?

McKinney: Yes. We had people who worked for the relief set-up who kept us informed about certain things that were going on, certain decisions that were being made, certain decisions that might probably be made, and what was being said about the leaders of the unemployed organization. This was very important: what was the opinion of the relief set-up about the leaders of the unemployed organization? What did they think of us? And we discovered many of these things, because we had people on the inside.

Not only that, we had in the unemployed organization a group which by the leadership was given the name of Action Committee. This committee was not generally known to exist in the organization. It was known only to a certain section of the organization. And the function of the Action Committee was to carry on certain activities, to acquire information that would be beneficial for the functioning of the League. Not only beneficial for the functioning of the League, but sometimes it became necessary to go to an individual and tell him to cease and desist and not carry on any more of the type of activities which he was carrying on, which were inimical to the interests of the unemployed. This was usually a warning that if you don't stop, something will happen to you.

Q: This particularly applied to the stool pigeons?

McKinney: That's absolutely right.

Q: Well, considering the deprivations of the times, there must have been a good deal of bitterness and even some spontaneity on the part of the unemployed, as far as taking matters into their own hands is concerned. Were there any incidents while you were doing this work, and how did you keep the unemployed from getting out of control?

McKinney: One of the things that made it easy, in certain respects, as far as the organized unemployed goes, was the fact that even before there was any organization of the unemployed, they had already started to act in some sort of organized manner in various parts of the country. That is, they were beginning to organize themselves on a neighborhood basis.

For instance, I remember in the Lawrenceville section of Pittsburgh, before there was any unemployed organization, a group of the unemployed in the neighborhood took hold of a deputy sheriff who was serving an eviction notice, chased him away and burned his car.

Now, although we were very positive about evictions and about attempting to stop them, nothing of this extreme measure took place after the unemployed were organized. That is, in most places nothing of this kind took place, because the organization had effected better control, better thinking on the part of the unemployed, and they understood that their function at an eviction was not to burn up property, to burn up automobiles, but to stop the family from being evicted, and if they succeeded in chasing the constable of the deputy sheriff away, they were very happy that he got in his car and drove his car away as rapidly as possible. And so in this manner, the unemployed

learned that their function was not merely the destruction of personal or public property, but their function was to accomplish certain ends which they had in view for their own improvement.

Q: Do you recall any particular incident which typified how the unemployed chased an eviction notice server away?

McKinney: There were several of these, one which I happened upon one day-- fortunately, luckily. I traveled around in a sidecar, an old broken down sidecar which our mechanics had rebuilt, and happened upon a hillside just as the members of the Unemployed League from that neighborhood were rocking the car of the deputy sheriff, about to push it over the hillside with him in mmm it. This would have been a drop of 50 or 60 feet, and of course the man and the car both would have been destroyed. I called them off and explained to him that it was lucky that I arrived, and that he should get away as rapidly as possible. He said he was only working, and that I ought to let him make this $10. I replied, "This is a hell of a way to make $10, and get going, don't come back any more."

He left, and of course the family was very thankful that they were kept in their house.

Q: What was the reaction of employers and community leaders to your apparent control over spontaneous acts of violence or destruction?

McKinney: The answer to this question must be, in part to remind people about just what the situation in the country was in 1930, '31, '33, '32. It is alleged that there were some people that were convinced that the country faced revolution, and who had taken pains to be prepared to leave should anything of this kind occur. Whether or not this has any factual basis is not what is important. What is important is that some people believed this. That was the situation in the country, and when the unemployed were demonstrating, marching, fighting, struggling, there was a tendency not to be lenient, but to be careful and cautious lest the demonstrating and the marching and the fighting increase.

The upper classes in the country were also so embattled with their opposition to the New Deal and all aspects of the New Deal that the problem of the unemployed became, in many respects, a minor problem with them. They hated Roosevelt far, far more than they hated the local unemployed leader that was milling around in their community.

Q: Did the local unemployed leader start gaining any status or

recognition on the part of the employers, to the extent that they would start treating with him, attempting to work out some modus vivendi this way?

McKinney: Absolutely, and in certain communities this made some progress and we got some results. In other communities we did not have such a happy relationship. There were relief directors who were sympathetic to the unemployed movement. These men were men who were liberals in their thinking and who have remained liberals to this day, most of them. Some of them have become reactionaries.

Q: At one point a little earlier you mentioned middle classes, at another point upper classes; would you define for the record what you have in mind here?

McKinney: Well, what I'm doing here is trying to tone down the full expression of my political views in this matter by talking about middle class and upper class.

Q: Are you equating this with income level, or position in the community -- which may be pretty well related anyway -- or what? In a city like Pittsburgh, who would be an example of an upper class man, and who of a middle class man?

McKinney: Since we were a mass organization under the leadership of a Marxist political party, we had very definite notions about the class structure of society, and it was our theoretical and practical opinion that there were two main classes in society, the ruling class and the working class. Any middle class in between was not always certain in which direction to turn. And this was the basis upon which we operated. This was the basis which the unemployed understood, in the main. Their language was not the same as our language. They talked about the boss and the worker, but they meant the same thing. When we talked about the ruling class and the worker -- the boss and the ruling class -- we did not, in our educational procedure and our teaching, differentiate between a man who was making $100,000 a year and a man who was making $15,000 a year. Not necessarily. The man who was making $15,000 a year was private secretary to the man who was making $100,000 a year; we didn't consider the former a friend to the unemployed, but a friend to the man who was making $100,000 a year.

Q: You mentioned particularly daughters of middle class families who volunteered to help out. What kinds of families did they come from? What did their particular fathers do?

McKinney: They were all sorts of people -- professional people,